

CONFERENCE SNAPSHOT SESSION

MY EXPERIENCES AS A NEW DEACON

Deacon Greg Kerr

When I got an email from Deacon Anthony Gooley I was surprised - why me I thought. But after discussing the proposal with my wife Terry I decided that it would be a good exercise for me to go through preparing it even if I did not actually give the presentation.

After listening to the two previous presentations I wondered what I can offer to the Conference as I am a relatively new kid on the block. I will have only been ordained two years tomorrow.

My journey towards the diaconate began some years ago when my wife decided that she wanted to enrol in an adult education program conducted by the Sister of St. Joseph at Lochinvar called "Christian Formation and Ministry." I said go ahead and enrol, but she wanted me to do it with her. I said I would go along for the first few weeks until she was comfortable and then I would leave her to it.

Three years later when we had finished the course Bishop Michael Malone was there for the graduation ceremony. After the ceremony was finished Bishop Michael asked me if I had ever thought about becoming a deacon, I responded that in fact I had. "Good" he said, "keep thinking about it."

About twelve months later at Terry graduation for a bereavement course that she had completed Bishop Michael was there again and he asked me had I done any more thinking about the Diaconate. I responded that I have and it was probably about time that I made an appointment to talk with him. After a lengthy discussion he agreed to support my application to begin the journey towards the Diaconate.

I was fortunate as there were a group of four others in formation at that time. So I joined in with them to begin my journey. We meet on one Sunday each month for the next four years to receive our formation from within the Diocese. Each of us was also working on our academic studies through Broken Bay Diocese which would eventually lead to either a Bachelor of Theology or a Master of Theology.

Bishop Michael conducted two retreats each year for the five of us and our spouses. This was a fabulous opportunity for us to get to know him and also for him to get to know us. There was obviously a method to his madness of giving so much time to the formation of his deacons.

The formation team of Father Greg Arnold, Deacon John Taylor and Sister Christine O'Connor were a great team as they coached, prodded, pushed and encouraged each of us along the way to get through all that was expected of us. I was particularly fortunate that I have a parish priest who has been, and continues to be extremely supportive and encouraging throughout my diaconate journey.

After one of these weekend retreats I told Bishop Michael that I had a proposal to put to him. By this stage three out of the group of five had been ordained in their respective parishes where they were going to be doing most of their ministry. I said to him "seeing that the others have been ordained in their local parish where they are going to work, is it possible for me to be ordained at the school where I would be doing much of my ministry. Where else are you going to get the chance to have nearly 900 teenagers witness an ordination?" "I like it" he replied, ""make it happen."

Boy that was easier said than done! Trying to get the liturgists to agree with the concept and then to meet all of the expectations was a great educational experience for me. They taught me much in the process.

Along the way I spent a lot of time explaining to the students of my school what a deacon was in the first place and then what was going to happen during the ceremony so that they might understand what was happening throughout the ceremony. I talked about the symbolic things like the laying on of hands by the Bishop and the vesting by my brother deacons. I even mentioned the Litany of the Saints and how I would be laying on the floor in front of the Bishop while everyone prayed to all of the saints for me. I told

them that I was worried that I might fall asleep while I was laying there and not be able to get up at the right time. I was worried during the ceremony that if I did get up they would cheer or laugh if I had a problem getting up.

The Bishop wanted us to have as many students involved in the liturgy as possible. Some of the girls in the dance group came up to me and told me that if the music students were going to have a part in my ordination then they had to have one as well. It was not a request but an order. One of the girls in the group was in year 12 and for the previous 6 years had visited my office twice a day every day to do a blood test to check up on her blood sugar levels as she is an insulin dependant diabetic. She choreographed the ballet dance for the group which they performed during the Reflection after Communion.

I have been extremely blessed to have Bishop Michael Malone as my bishop. He is an awesome man and without a doubt the best bishop I have ever had any dealings with. A couple of weeks after my ordination we gathered together, all of the deacons, our spouses and the formation team with Bishop Michael at Kincumber for the final retreat of our program. The two previously ordained deacons in the diocese joined us and Bishop Michael referred to us as his "Magnificent Seven." I certainly felt that we were something special. I wondered how many other deacons have had their Bishop devote so much time to their formation.

Shortly after my ordination I was fortunate to be able to attend the previous National Deacon's Conference at the Broken Bay Diocese complex in Pennant Hills. There I was asked to preach at the final Mass, this was the first time I had actually preached as a Deacon. It was bad enough the room was full of so many of you experienced Deacons but my Bishop was there as well and I was very nervous.

What is my role now as a Deacon?

- Leading school liturgies
- Funerals for staff members' parents
- Funerals of students' parents and grandparents
- Baptising children of staff
- Performing wedding of staff
- Performing weddings for ex-students.
- Baptising children of ex-students.
- Assist in many ways in our parish and Diocese.
- Chaplain to Australian Army Cadets NSW Bde and have since been asked to become a chaplain within the Army reserves as well.

My experiences have certainly been both humbling and challenging. When I was asked by one of my staff members who I have know for many years if I would do the funeral ceremony for her mother it was both a surprise and an honour.

When I was first asked to be the celebrant for an ex-student's wedding it was a great honour and something that I have really enjoyed doing. It has been a great experience working with these ex-students as they go through their marriage preparation program and plan their wedding ceremony.

It has been such an incredible experience working with these young adults who I taught when they were in year seven or somewhere throughout their schooling and now to have them come and ask me to do their wedding or baptise their child. It is amazing to watch the change in the expression on their faces when they ask and I say of course I would love to do your wedding or baptise your child. The relief at not being questioned as to why they have not been at Mass for a while or any one of a hundred other questions they had feared would be asked.

I believe that it is not my job to question their past only to welcome them back to the Church and show them that I, as the Church's representative in this case, am pleased to have them back. I have made a point of emphasising that they are now taking on a new role and they have to re-think their previous

approach to Church. One son of a staff member who finally agreed to pacify his mother and have his son baptised said to me after the ceremony that I had tweaked his conscience and would have to start to do things differently. I replied by saying that he had to start listening to his conscience much more not just what I had said to him.

One of the weddings I have done was for two ex-students, when they asked me to “do their wedding” I said I would be delighted especially as they were both Catholics and there would not be so much paperwork. Rachael at first looked worried and then said “but Matt is not a Catholic is that going to be a problem?” She said he has always wanted to be one. I said what do you mean not a Catholic you have been here in the school for six years how come you are not a Catholic? No one asked me was the response. “Do you still want to be a Catholic?” I asked. Yes was his response, great I said we’ll soon fix this situation.

I met with one of the local priests and arranged with him to “do him” with a multi-sacrament ceremony at one of the Friday afternoon parish Masses. Matt was soon, Baptised, Confirmed and made his first Communion all in one ceremony. What a great experience that was. The priest I had approached was one of those who had previously not been all that supportive of the idea of Deacons but has drastically changed his position since.

Just last week Rachael and Matt came into my office for a visit and brought this photo of Terry and me at their wedding. They had brought a thank you card in which they had written, ‘thank you for all you have done for us. You are a great role model for us and we hope to be like you are.’ Isn’t that what our role as Deacon’s is? To be a role model to those in our community so that others can be encouraged to take a more active role within the Church?

Like all of the others who have spoken here today, I have to say that I could not have done what I do without the support and encouragement from my wife. We are in this together, as I am doing the marriage preparation for example Terry types the draft copy of the wedding ceremony so that we can provide it to the couple to take and have printed. We pray the Daily Office together as part of our daily ritual. I am greatly blessed to have her as my wife.